

Finding Your Voice

An interdisciplinary visual art unit for eighth grade

Introduction:

This unit is intended to be taught in a multi-arts environment with an emphasis on the elements and principles of all of the arts. In our case Instrumental music, vocal music, media arts, dance, theatre, literary arts, and visual arts are included. The Language Arts and Social Studies teachers are also involved. I will be describing the visual arts portion of this unit which will assume certain knowledge and projects taught by other teachers in other disciplines.

Objectives:

- Review figure drawing and human proportions. Students will demonstrate accurate human proportions in preparatory figure drawings.
- Students will demonstrate understanding of expressive distortion in art by drawing expressive figures which effectively communicate the intended emotion.
- Students will analyze their own and other students' art for use of artistic principles and effective composition, as well as for expressive qualities.

Additional cooperative objectives:

- Students will work cooperatively with other students to create a multi-arts performance which expresses personal or political values held by the students about a social issue of their choosing.
- Students will effectively use principles of at least two arts disciplines to cooperatively create performances.
- Students will communicate their views and intent in a clearly written artist's statement.

Pre-Teaching:

In preparation for this unit a unit was taught reviewing figure drawing. Students practiced gesture drawing and used gesture drawing as a warm up for the remaining classes. Students were taught human proportions using the "head" method (e.g. a human is 7.5 heads tall, shoulders are 2 heads wide, etc.) and create tin-man drawings of ideal human proportions. Finally students review contour lines and contour drawing and make figure drawings using each other as models. (And, I hasten to add that these are clothed-figure drawings, of course.) These drawings are assessed on accurate proportions, effective use of contour, and naturalistic gesture.

Introductory Activities:

- I. Students are shown a slide of an expressive work by Kathe Kollwitz. Students are asked to generate questions about the work, in pairs, and to write down the questions (using colored markers in case they want to organize their questions in some way.)

The whole class generates a list of questions they have about the work.

It is crucial that the work in question be a very striking image, which will generate many interesting questions. As they share questions the teacher writes them on the board, organizing and categorizing the questions as they are presented. Students are given the opportunity to discuss the work in greater depth, encouraged to express interpretations or opinions, but generally not corrected yet.

Teacher presents information about Kathe Kollwitz, her work and her life story. (Information about K.K. is plentiful in books or on the Internet. I generally work from memory for this part, but discuss and show the transition from her earlier more narrative art to her later more expressive art, and emphasize her husband's work with as a doctor and her exposure to poverty and illness and the emotional impact of those experiences on her art. We often also discuss the changing role of women throughout the 1900s and how that influenced her art.) Students are asked to take notes on the factual information.

- II. Students are sorted into groups and are given a variety of figurative art works from many eras and in many styles (but including several which are very expressive) and are asked to sort and categorize them in some way. Groups present their choices and describe their categories. The whole class is led in a discussion of the uses of the human figure in art (narrative, expressive, symbolic, etc*) Students speculate about the artistic intent behind the artworks. Students are led to the conclusion that artists make conscious choices about the mode of representation to communicate their intent most effectively. This activity is relatively brief, less than half of a period including discussion.
- III. Teacher leads a discussion of social activism in art, using art works of Kathe Kollwitz as examples (although a brief slide show of other examples from other eras would be excellent at this point, and I have also shown videos about American protest music, shown snippets of the movie *Cradle Will Rock*, and played various songs by folk musicians,) and students brainstorm a list of social issues from history, then a separate list of social issues that influence their life today. This discussion draws heavily on their work in World Cultures class and would take considerably longer if taught in a stand-alone art program. Students are asked about their progress on their papers for World

Cultures and are encouraged to share information about their topic with the class when relevant. Students write or map visually about their feelings about the social issues on our list, which issues impact them personally, which they feel strongly about and why. In my room this happens in a sketch book, but this would be a great worksheet opportunity as well. Encourage students to represent the information in any format they are comfortable with, as a linear narrative, or as a spatial map. At the end of this process students are going to select a topic about which they are going to create an expressive (persuasive) artwork. If they choose to select the same topic that they are writing about for World Cultures they will not need to do additional research, otherwise they will need to gather information about the topic they have chosen.

- IV.** Once students have selected and researched the social they will draw a series of thumb-nail drawings to come up with ideas for their composition. In the past I allowed students to drop the figurative element at this point if they felt they could communicate their topic effectively and expressively without a figure. This year I will be pairing with the dance teacher and the dance students to come up with "shapes" or gestures, which express how the student feels about their social issue. The figurative element will be required. The dance teacher and I will group students who are working on similar social issues, the dance students beginning to create shapes and phrases, the visual art students making gesture drawings of the dancers and beginning to distort those drawings for expressive meaning. The dance students and art students giving each other feedback on the expressive content of their respective works.
- V.** Back in the art room the visual art students will select their best planning drawing and complete a charcoal expressive figure drawing (possibly containing several figures) which communicates how they feel about their social issue. Special attention will be given to composition and contrast. Students will also be asked to include other "expressive" stylistic elements such as overt line quality. Within their small groups students will discuss each others work, giving feedback, and reworking as necessary. Students will pair with one other student to analyze that student's use of the elements and principles paying attention to the success of the expressive intent. These drawings will be assessed by the teacher as well. All students have the opportunity to rework these drawings to more effectively communicate their intended meaning.

This is the end of the exclusively visual art portion of this lesson, and I think this much could be taught in a stand-alone art program.

Preparing for the finding your voice performance:

- I.** Students will be divided by topic to include students from several art disciplines. Theatre students will have monologues, dance students will have movement phrases, and potentially fairly developed ensemble dances, instrumental and vocal music students will have compositions, visual arts students will have their drawings, and so on. The students will make decisions about combining their individual pieces to form a cohesive multi-arts performance piece. They will be led by an arts teacher in this process, and receive feedback from peers and from other arts teachers. Some may decide to leave portions of the work as stand-alone pieces, some may sequence the work making directorial choices about pacing and some groups may intertwine the work, so that the music, images, monologues, and movement all occur concurrently on the stage. Creating additional work at this point may also occur. In the past the format for this was fairly informal and even accidental. A student who had written and rehearsed a monologue in Visual Arts paired with a topically related dance ensemble put their work together during class time in the hallway. And it was beautiful. This year 8th grade students who elect to be a part of the performance will meet once a week after school to bring their work together and create the performance. This after school class will be co-taught by all of the arts teachers. Next year we hope to use the afternoon exploratory time to rehearse and build the performance.

- II.** Students will be asked to write an artists' statement about the choices they made in their cooperative group. The purpose of this statement is to clarify their intent, and self assess their work. Excerpts of these artists' statements will be included in the program at the performance and will be available on display before and after the performance. The cooperative work will be assessed predominantly through the students writing and their use of the terminology from all of the arts disciplines they used.